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**PSC TO HOLD HEARING IN BILLINGS MARCH 28  
ON NORTHWESTERN ENERGY'S PROPOSED JUDITH GAP WIND CONTRACT**

The state Public Service Commission will hold a hearing next Monday in Billings to obtain public comments on NorthWestern Energy's application for approval of a proposed wind power contract with Judith Gap Energy. The hearing, to be conducted by Commissioner Brad Molnar whose PSC district includes the Billings area, will be held at 7 p.m. in the Lewis and Clark Room, Student Union Building, MSU – Billings. Commissioner Thomas J. Schneider will also be at the hearing.

Under the proposed contract, NorthWestern, the default electricity supplier for about 304,000 Montana customers, would buy 135 to 150 megawatts of electricity from a wind farm near Judith Gap. According to NorthWestern's filing, the average price of the wind power would be \$31.71 per megawatt-hour, taking into account the federal production tax credit for wind energy and a proposed state property tax reduction for wind facilities. The actual cost of adding a wind resource to the default supply portfolio would be higher than the price of the wind contract alone because NorthWestern will also have to procure a "firming" resource to supply electricity when the wind is not blowing.

NorthWestern submitted the preapproval application on February 7 and asked the PSC to rule on the wind contract no later than March 31. According to NorthWestern, the expedited schedule is essential if Judith Gap Energy's wind farm is to be in operation by December of this year in order to take advantage of the federal production tax credit. The tax credit expires at the end of the year.

The PSC held its technical hearing on this matter last week in Helena.

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